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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 003745

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: PGOV KCRM PREL LE SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARCH 14 LEADERS ASK CODEL NOT TO TALK  
WITH SYRIA, SHARE STRATEGIES FOR NEXT STEPS

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶11. (C) On November 29 the Ambassador and CODEL Hoekstra met March 14 leaders and others to discuss the current crisis in Lebanon and the possible impact of reopening a U.S.-Syrian dialogue. The CODEL heard March 14 figures pledge to resist peacefully the coming demonstrations and to keep their government running. Defense Minister Murr and Patriarch Sfeir were optimistic that the army could maintain calm and protect the government. Walid Jumblatt and Saad Hariri were more pessimistic, believing that further violence is likely. UN Special Representative to Lebanon Geir Pedersen called the situation "hopeless" and envisioned the next Lebanese government as strongly influenced by Hizballah. All March 14 leaders vowed to maintain calm and resist countering Hizballah demonstrations with their own.

¶12. (C) March 14 leaders and Pedersen suggested that international creation of the tribunal under Chapter VII of the UN Charter would help. They also suggested dialogue with Syria would be best left until after the tribunal was implemented and a clear set of "sticks" and "carrots" were identified to compel Syria to change its behavior. End Summary.

DIVERGENT VIEWS OF THE NEXT STEP

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¶13. (C) On November 29 the Ambassador, House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence Chairman Peter Hoekstra, committee member Darrel Issa, and professional staff member James Lewis met with a variety of March 14 leaders and later with the UN Special Representative to Lebanon Geir Pedersen to discuss the current crisis in Lebanon and the possible effects on Lebanon of reopening a U.S.-Syrian dialogue. The CODEL heard March 14 figures pledge to stand strong against coming demonstrations and to refuse to allow their government to be toppled.

¶14. (C) Defense Minister Murr and Patriarch Sfeir were cautiously optimistic that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) could maintain calm, prevent violence, and hold together the government. Murr said March 14 would not bring in new Shia ministers, but let the resigned ministers appear responsible for the problems they've caused while March 14 puts forth an image of openness. The LAF is ready to protect the government and citizens amidst the "severe turbulence" that is coming, but Murr expects that increased Syrian influence

will precipitate more assassinations. Patriarch Sfeir is working to reunite Christians under common principles, and to build support for the next president who should be equidistant between the two camps. He asked for U.S. assistance in rebuilding GOL institutions such as the LAF.

¶15. (C) Walid Jumblatt and Saad Hariri were more pessimistic, believing that further violence is likely as March 14 tries to continue governing, stay out of the streets, and setup the tribunal. Jumblatt said that without external pressure on Syria, the Syrians will prevent any political compromise in Lebanon and with that, they will block passage of the tribunal. Hariri suggested that Syrian-facilitated terrorist violence will increase in Lebanon, and that UNIFIL is a likely target.

¶16. (C) Most pessimistic was Geir Pedersen, the UNSYG's personal representative to Lebanon, who described the situation in Lebanon as "hopeless." He sees legal passage of the tribunal as impossible, and envisions a government in which Hizballah indirectly controls the state through allies who will seem moderate and not pro-Syrian. While March 14 could still give Aoun the presidency to force the March 8 alliance to collapse, Lebanon would be stuck with a pro-Syrian president for 6 more years and Aoun would try to destroy March 14 and the Hariri family.

MARCH 14 RESISTING THE URGE TO DEMONSTRATE

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¶17. (C) Murr, Jumblatt, and Hariri view the Hizballah demonstrations scheduled to begin on December 1 as a psychological tool that March 14 can overcome. Their strategy is for March 14 to remain calm, refuse to match

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Hizballah's demonstrations, and retain the government while the opposition's more radical actions work against it. They cited concerns, however, that they might lose control of some confessional leaders. The LAF is prepared to deal with March 14 followers who don't restrain themselves in the same way it will deal with Hizballah demonstrators, Murr noted.

¶18. (C) Jumblatt described Hizballah's recurrent threat of demonstrations as "psychological warfare," and his refusal to specify a location or date as a message that Hizballah is able to target March 14 anytime, anywhere. Perhaps Nasrallah has hesitated to call demonstrations because he is afraid to rouse what could become uncontrollable Sunni-Shia tensions, or afraid that he will not be able to bring any Christians or Sunnis into the street. Hariri suggested that the rigidity of Hizballah's demand to topple the government is forcing a gradual shift in public opinion back toward March 14. Street clashes and blocking the international tribunal will cause Hizballah to lose supporters in the Arab world.

¶19. (C) Pedersen assessed that Hizballah and Aoun are playing "Russian roulette" with street demonstrations they know they are likely to lose control of. They think that this powerful message as well as their superior organization will force the majority to give in. But support for Nasrallah is weakening in the Shia community as fatigue and resentment set in. Murr suggested that Hizballah bowed to Shia workers' pressure, delaying the strike until employees could collect their salaries at the end of the month.

¶10. (C) Jumblatt assessed that Aoun is afraid to demonstrate because he risks the Patriarch's condemnation, potential clashes with the Lebanese Forces, and a decrease in his popularity among the Christians. Patriarch Sfeir reported that Aoun on November 28 sent a message to say he would boycott demonstrations.

INTERNATIONAL TRIBUNAL IMPLEMENTATION

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¶11. (C) Pedersen passed a request from the Saudis that the U.S. enlist international support for the creation of the tribunal under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Nabih Berri, acting under Syrian influence, will not allow the tribunal to be passed in parliament. For Prime Minister Siniora to request that the tribunal be implemented under Chapter VII would be tantamount to issuing his own death sentence. Therefore the Saudis hope the U.S. can persuade likely objectors not to veto the Chapter VII authorization.

¶12. (C) Pedersen also noted Hizballah's public comments and private motivations for blocking the tribunal. While Hizballah is still "committed in principle" to the tribunal, and offers to discuss it, they insist that March 14 give them a blocking minority in Cabinet before they agree to the tribunal. Pedersen assess that Syria is forcing Hizballah and Amal to take this position because it is a "life or death" issue for the regime. If even a single Syrian official is implicated, the regime will be threatened. Syria needs to hear that the international community is united behind Lebanon, Pedersen noted, but even that may not stop them from bringing down the Lebanese government.

REQUESTING THAT TALKS WITH SYRIA  
AWAIT INTERNATIONAL LEVERAGE

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¶13. (C) Pedersen and March 14 leaders agreed that launching a U.S. dialogue with Syria before a tribunal is created would create despair among March 14, and would not likely result in improved Syrian behavior. Indeed, Syrian behavior might very well worsen, as Syria believes it has cover for more killings. Hariri suggested that calls for U.S. dialogue with Syria are increasing the already strong and organized Iranian and Syrian pressure in Lebanon. Is the U.S. willing to give Syria what it wants -- an end to UNSCR 1701, cancellation of the tribunal, and assurances of regime stability and Syrian influence in the region -- in exchange for dialogue? If the U.S. must open dialogue with Syria it must be through a unified voice via the UN.

¶14. (C) Jumblatt wondered why the U.S. would consider talking to Syria without a clear new message, a "stick," or a "carrot"? The tribunal is the only available threat when talking to the Syrian regime, so dialogue should not go forward without linkage to passage of the tribunal. The

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return of the Golan Heights is one possible carrot. Jumblatt suggested symbolic actions would have a greater effect on Syrian than dialogue, including military operations along the border and opening a door to the Syrian opposition.

¶15. (C) Murr described U.S. dialogue with Syria as "capitulation." Patriarch Sfeir pointed out that Lebanon's attempts to establish diplomatic relations with Syria had failed, suggesting that U.S. attempts to restore a sincere relationship might not be well received.

FELTMAN